

## **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2003**

### **Second Prize: Cassie Lear, Washington Middle School**

#### **The Fight for Equality**

“Now, I say to you today my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. He visualized bringing people together under a single axiomatic ideal: all people, regardless of race, are equal. This truth is stated in the United States Constitution and the Pledge of Allegiance. People generally accept that fellow humans are equal, but often act like the Pigs who said, “...some animals are more equal than others” in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Since the founding of the United States of America, one group of humans has always looked down upon another.

It took a civil war to lay slavery to rest, and government sanctioned racial discrimination continued into the 1960’s. An Alabama library banned a children’s book that pictured black and white rabbits next to each other. Black and white workers could not look out of the same windows in a South Carolina cotton mill. The listings of Oklahoma telephone books were segregated.

Segregation was unfair to African Americans. They knew it, and there were many rebellious acts of protest against the policy. Black boys dared each other to drink from the drinking fountain marked “white”. Dark-skinned girls bought food in restaurants and sat in the section reserved for whites. An African American girl named Pat Shuttlesworth and her friends once ordered food from a restaurant, and walked out after learning that only whites could sit there.

A legal fight about segregating seating rights on city buses ended up in the Supreme Court. Black people had to give up their seats to whites, had to stand over empty seats reserved for whites. Rosa Parks was arrested, jailed, and fined for defying these laws. Starting on the day of her trial, African Americans all over the city of Montgomery, Alabama stayed off buses. Blacks made up about three-fourths of the riders on city buses. This boycott continued for over a year. The Montgomery Bus Boycott is said to be the start of Dr. Martin Luther King’s career. He was elected head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Dr. King raised sympathy for the boycott with his electrifying speeches. To help with the boycott, the MIA brought contributions from the North to the black churches in Montgomery. The MIA could not legally transport boycotters, but other organizations could. Many churches purchased station wagons with help from the MIA. The boycott was a success. Bus segregation was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1956. Blacks had stayed off buses for thirteen months.

Protests happened all over the country. By the 1950's, blacks were actively fighting for their rights. Segregated schools were declared unconstitutional in 1954. Many people fought this new ruling-especially white southerners. In the South, schools did not become integrated until ten or twenty years after this ruling.

Sisters Pat and Ricky Shuttlesworth were the first people to try and enroll in an all-white school. As they got out of the car on their first day, hundreds of white people had gathered to watch. They began to beat Mr. Shuttlesworth with chains. Mrs. Shuttlesworth was stabbed in the hip. Pat and Ricky never saw the inside of the school that day.

A more successful integration happened in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nine black students were chosen to go to an all-white school. They were kept out of school the first three weeks of the term by armed guards ordered by the mayor. After being kept outside the school at bayonet point, yelled at by mobs, the President sent troops to escort the students to school. A paratrooper accompanied each of them to their classes.

Black people fought hard for their rights. They stood up for themselves both silently and loudly. A major civil rights advocate was Dr. Martin Luther King. The pastor of Dexter Avenue Church helped organize many protests, including the March on Washington. Dr. King supported non-violent protests. His demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, followed his idea of non-violence. On his second march in that area, King set out with 1,500 marchers and they walked across Pettus Bridge. The marchers ran into armed forces on the other side. They knelt in prayer for a moment, then turned back. This demonstration had mouths buzzing. It impressed the country, and helped pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King also spoke out against the Vietnam War. He wanted to gather a group of poor workers from many races to work on economic problems such as unemployment and poverty.

King was very influential. He helped African Americans prove to the country that they deserved the same treatment as whites. On April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated, he told his audience: "I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

Dr. King united many cultures and generations with the idea that black people deserved the same rights as whites. He knew that blacks could stand up for their rights, and helped them believe it. He always seemed sure that he would win.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

### Bibliography

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